**Characteristics of an Anglican Bishop**

“What it is that we think makes us Anglicans and what are the characteristics common to a good Bishop?” It has taken me quite a few months of thought, resting these thoughts and then more thought. I believe the two questions posed are for selecting an Anglican Bishop, and so the question of what makes any of us Anglican must be answered first.

In general, to be Anglican is to worship according to an authorized version of the Book of Common Prayer and be in communion with the See of Canterbury. This is to say, we are liturgical in our devotions and give credence to a common heritage through the Church of England and a common authority in headship. On a more personal level, I find Anglicanism is as much the orthodoxy in apostolic teachings as it is embracing God in the ordinary routine of life. This does not discount the manifestation of God’s presence through unusual phenomena, miraculous healings or other such events. Like Brother Lawrence in “The Practice of the Presence of God” we look for the extraordinary through the ordinary.

An Anglican justifies their authority in Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience. Neither of these can hold sway on their own, but together bring a balanced and stable spiritual life. Reason is more than analysis and logic. It is the power of the human mind to discern truth either through intuitiveness or rational thought. God’s grace illuminates our understanding until it falls in line with His. The path to this understanding is where experience lending itself to reason becomes wisdom. Our traditions reveal a heritage that can be traced through the Church of England and the Church of Rome through to the original apostles. They are to be valued in their meanings and teachings even to this day.

The Anglican Church teaches us that nothing should be taught contrary to scripture, which is not the same as saying that only what is in scripture will be taught. Scripture should never transcend reason and both have their place in the traditions of our communal practice and worship. The tradition of passing down the historical background, practices and worship is what has evolved into the writing of the Books of the Bible. Anglican Traditions are imbued with Scripture, Reason and Experience lending themselves to a balanced practice in spiritual life.

Naturally, an Anglican Bishop must hold true to Anglican Theology. But more so than that, he must be a leader and manager, a person with skill sets that have been developed through years of study and working in a secular/religious environment and/or one who has been gifted with the innate ability to lead and guide others toward making the right decisions. He is essentially the Board Chair. The Chair does not make motions or even seconds a motion, but convinces the members of the board of the necessity to motion in a certain direction after research and discussion. We look to the Bishop to guide and lead our organization with a keen ear to God’s will and an open ear to His people. They have no personal agenda other than to value God’s people and be open to allowing the Lord to use all of us in bringing in His Kingdom whatever way He chooses.

The Bishop is not a judge with gavel in hand nor do they impose their will unnecessarily. They are the presence of wisdom and understanding that waits quietly as a discussion plays out. Then weighing the various details, they ask what needs to be asked in order to guide the diocese in choosing the right path. The Bishop is a counselor whose insight is respected by their peers and sought after by their subordinates. One such Bishop I know, is + William Love of the Episcopal Diocese of Albany. There stands a pillar that blocks the secular agenda of the Episcopal National Church and in doing so protects his charge from a wolf in sheep’s clothing. He does not speak loudly, or often. However, when he does his words are laden with wisdom and understanding as he guides his diocese through tumultuous waters. When mistakes are made, as they inevitably are, he bends like a reed correcting for the errors and moves forward humbled, wiser and all the more human in his parishioner’s eyes.

A Bishop must understand and live with the eschatological tension of their Christianity – the pull between what is already present and what is to come. This constant tug defines their character as much as it defines every Christian that contemplates the will of God and thereby defines the diocese. A Bishop must not be so heavenly minded that they become no earthly good. In this I mean they are not to deaden themselves to the world around them. Rather they are to see the world, realize it, live toward it and understand that it is in part cause for the constant longing toward the promise. It is the living in and watching out for God’s presence that makes us truly human. In our humanity God has also graciously given us the capacity to receive His Divine presence. In His presence we find cause to long for Him as much as He longs to give Himself to us – affirmation in the promise. So yes, a Bishop’s character is rightly shaped with the push and pull of their present humanity and the Divine presence of God in and around them.

There are times when a leader has to make decisions that may impose risk upon their political position as Bishop and potential risk to the diocese. This is often done with a great deal of advice through legal, quality management and various appointed committees and ad-hoc committees so as not to jeopardize the integrity of the organization. Since the Bishop ultimately oversees these committees they will be facing the full political fallout. I remember Bishop Daniel Herzog of the Episcopal Diocese in Albany standing in the full face of a political scandal perpetuated by those attempting to undermine his authority and Diocesan decisions. They filled the ears of the local media and news outlets with unsubstantiated truths and twisted perceptions. Again, wolves in sheep’s clothing for these attacks came from a small group within the Diocese with the desire of changing its direction. Their method was deception and they failed - but not without their efforts causing a great deal of discord. Fortunately, his predecessor, Bishop David Ball, along with Bishop Herzog saw through the smoke screen and stood in the gap, strengthening the Diocese’s position in doing so.

These are very real issues a Bishop may have to deal with and not collapse beneath the weight. They need a strong prayer life and support in prayer from trusted networks established throughout their Christian life. Most importantly, they must know that they are called to the position and accept that calling willingly. Bishop Love struggled greatly with his nomination, but in the end knew he could not refuse God’s call. These features are not specific to Bishops alone. Every Christian to varying degrees has these characteristics and great potential to develop them in their Christian walk. And, though their elected leader may not see these traits within their self, they are not hidden from those around them.

In the end, a Bishop is hopefully the encouragement God’s people need. They need to feel valued. They need to not only be heard but listened to. They do not need to be preached at, they need to be taught at the pace they are willing to learn. A good shepherd knows their sheep because they spend time together and their sheep know him. The shepherd can tell in their gate or the look in their eyes that something is amiss and knows to pray accordingly. They do not intrude, but gently strike up a conversation allowing us to feel safe, that we can speak freely… and H/he will listen… and this means a great deal.

Bishop Pike